

Summer 2024

# Leaders & Learners

The official magazine of the Canadian  
Association of School System Administrators

Association canadienne des gestionnaires  
de commissions scolaires

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**Kevin Kaardal**  
CASSA/ACGCS President

At the end of May, I attended the College Board of Canada's National Forum where leaders from governments, post-secondary institutions, and public education from across Canada came together to share ideas about several topics that are critical to education in Canada: Truth and Reconciliation, Nature and Sustainability, Inclusive Access to Post-Secondary, and AI.

Leaders shared their views on changes to public education that will be driven by the advent of AI. The panel suggested that AI will require a change in focus from curriculum delivery centered around traditional knowledge-based approaches to a focus on concept based, to competency driven tasks, with a focus on collaboration and its ethical use.

The Organisation for Economic and Cooperative Development (OECD) states in a recent report: *The hard questions are not about teaching educators how to use ultra-generic chatbots, but how to reorient schools to prepare their students for the world of hyper-intelligent machines. These are the hard questions that involve reorienting the role of teachers and prioritizing problem-solving, creativity, and critical thinking in the classroom; fostering community and collaboration; building interdisciplinary knowledge and expanding experiential and entrepreneurial learning that is tied to the community. It's about redesigning teaching and learning to emphasize these essential skills.*

As we prepare our learners to thrive, leading thinkers recognize that those who understand and can utilize artificial intelligence software will have an advantage within the work force. AI is a tool that provides great opportunities, is a powerful search engine, can speed up tasks, personalize learning, support student criterion-based assessments, and support creative thinking. It is also flawed. It uses data that is culturally biased and hallucinates (gets things wrong in a convincing way).

AI will require pedagogical shifts to tasks that involve deep learning and problem solving, that require collaborative approaches, involve the evaluation and checking of information or developed theories, and finally support agency and inquiry. Networks of leading educators are already trying to address the shift. They exist nationally, provincially, and regionally. I encourage you to join one and experience the joy of learning.

As system leaders, we need to set up district networks of educators who can support the in-service of their peers to ensure effective use of the software's capabilities to personalize learning. This includes learning how to be more effective at prompting (prompt engineers are a real job), to get more accurate and targeted results.

In the B.C. Ministry of Education and Childcare document, "*Considerations for Using AI Tools in K-12 Schools*" there is a reminder that responsible integration is required, and **that education is inherently relational** (as is most work) with human connections playing a vital role in learning and work. AI can be a powerful tool. All we must do as leaders is find ways to set conditions so that the potential good that can result from using these tools is the most likely outcome of our collective work.

As my term as President ends, I thought I would start my last message

as the Canadian Association of School System Administrators (CASSA) President by expressing my gratitude to Executive Director Ken Bain, the Executive Council, and the Board. They have continued to grow and refine the work of CASSA, including extending its reach both nationally and internationally. And thank you, CASSA members, for doing the work that will impact generations to come.

Links to provincial, national, and international organizations detailing their view on the future of public schooling in the era of increasingly intelligent machines:

### **BC Ministry of Education and Child Care:**

<https://www2.gov.bc.ca/gov/content/governments/organizational-structure/ministries-organizations/ministries/education>

<https://www2.gov.bc.ca/assets/gov/education/administration/kindergarten-to-grade-12/ai-in-education/considerations-for-using-ai-tools-in-k-12-schools.pdf>

### **Australia:**

<https://www.education.gov.au/schooling/resources/australian-framework-generative-artificial-intelligence-ai-schools>

### **Organisation for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD):**

<https://www.oecd-ilibrary.org/sites/f54ea644en/index.html?itemId=/content/component/f54ea644-en>

<https://stefanbauschard.substack.com/p/new-oecd-report-and-me-preparing>

This summer's issue of *Leaders & Learners* focuses on leadership in its many forms and contexts. We learn about a guide to success for a leadership culture in Foothills School Division (Alberta) lead by Superintendent Christopher Fuzessy. The article shares the collective work in placing education at the centre of a flourishing community. Another article, from Superintendent Chris Gilmour, Connect Charter Schools in Alberta, will explore activities and programming to support three areas of mental health: self and emotional awareness, self-management strategies and tools, and resiliency.

An article written by Superintendent Teresa Di Ninno and Principal Jeney Gordon, CAPE Public Charter School discusses the two key elements of their approach to support the challenges faced by students suffering from trauma, mental health struggles, and a lack of connection with adults. A further article from the Université de Sherbrooke examines possible strategies to assist teachers to better serve students for whom English is not their first language.

From Queen's University and senior leaders from Lakeshore Catholic District

School Board in Ontario, we have an analysis of data throughout a four-month long intervention that documented leaders' experiences and a series of recommendation on factors that most influenced their school level engagement. Lastly, Ashley McLennan and David Tranter examine the evolving landscape of Social and Emotional Learning (SEL) in education.

After more than a decade in the role, I have decided to retire and turn the role of Executive Director over to a new leader. I have worked alongside the Canadian Association of School System Administrators (CASSA) presidents whose commitment to the importance of a national association of school system leaders has been quite extraordinary as they all had very demanding roles as school system leaders and continued to support the association. My thanks to Roger Nippard (Alberta), Cindy Finn (Quebec), Anne O'Brien (Ontario), Reg Klassen (Manitoba), Curtis Brown (Northwest Territories), and Kevin Kaardal (British Columbia).

My sincere thanks to the dozens of CASSA board members who have given of their time to support the association and its goals.

I also want to express my appreciation to the wonderful staff at Matrix Group



**Ken Bain**  
CASSA/ACGCS Executive Director

Publishing with whom I have had the pleasure of working over many years to create issues of *Leaders & Learners*. Thanks to Shannon Savory, Shoshana Weinberg, and most recently Jenna Collignon.

Lastly, I want to pay tribute to my predecessor and mentor, Frank Kelly, without whose unwavering commitment, there would be no CASSA. I learned a lot from Frank – especially the importance of personal and professional relationships.

I leave the association knowing that it is in a strong place and look forward to hearing about its future success. Best wishes to you all.

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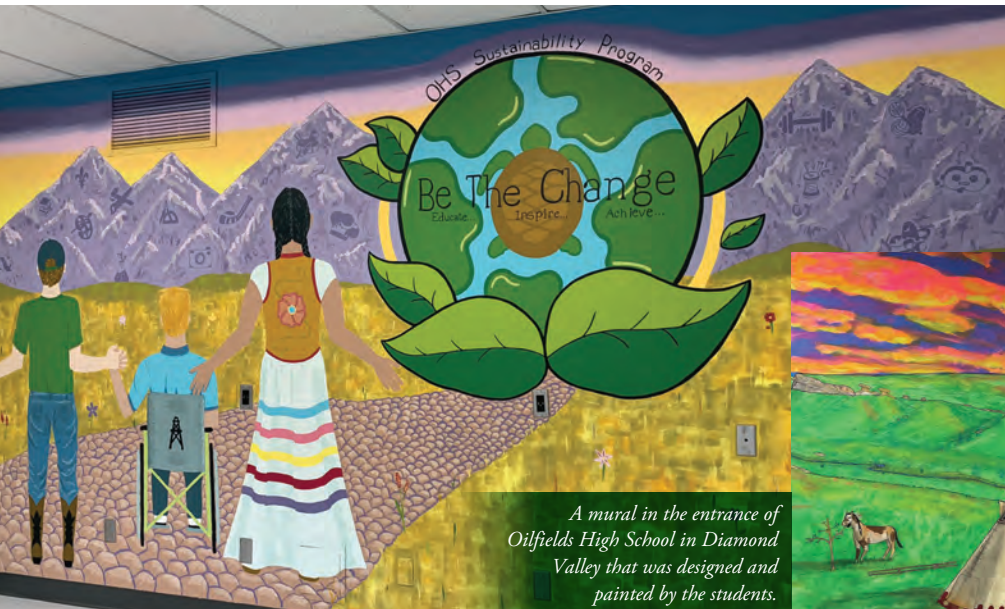
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# A Guide to Success for a Flourishing Leadership Culture



*A mural in the entrance of Oilfields High School in Diamond Valley that was designed and painted by the students.*



*A mural created by a local Indigenous artist and parent, Jared Tailfeathers, at Spitzee School in High River. It is part of the school's work in advancing Truth and Reconciliation in the community. Photos courtesy of Christopher Fuzessy.*

By Christopher Fuzessy,  
Foothills School Division

**A**t Foothills School Division (FSD), our work is grounded in our organizational purpose: *Placing education at the centre of a flourishing community*. Leaders have a responsibility to model what flourishing and effective leadership is and what it looks like for the staff teams we lead and the communities we serve. With this responsibility as our guide, our professional learning team recently led a 10-month initiative to develop the *Guide to Success for a Flourishing Leadership Culture*.

The pandemic and the time we spent apart took a toll on the positive professional connections within our team, and we knew that rebuilding trust, collaboration, and a shared sense of purpose would be essential to positioning our schools as hubs of community vitality and growth. Drawing on an Appreciative Inquiry approach, our school and system leadership team embarked on a journey of shared learning over the 2022/2023 school year.

## Reflective practice: distilling the fundamentals

Each learning day began with a reflective exercise where team members individually considered how a quote, a question, a poem, or a song lyric could inform or contribute to their leadership work in education. These reflections evolved from silent and individual to small and large group discussions, gradually distilling the fundamental elements of our practice and their role in our organizational future.

“What are the values and principles that guide our leadership?” we asked. “How can we leverage the strengths of our organization to create a flourishing future?”

Through thinking routines and collaborative dialogue, we unearthed the core tenets that would form the foundation of our Guide. We had to *truly listen* to one another. It is important to note that this work was not always easy. We considered our end goal, allowed time for dialogue to

emerge from discussion, and adhered to our group norms of mutual respect and critical feedback. We also had to keep our end goal in mind and dedicate the time necessary for dialogue to emerge out of discussion while remaining within our group norms of mutual respect and critical friends.

## Psychological safety: building trust and candor

The structures we employed encouraged relationship-building and trust, with leaders sitting in different groups and with different colleagues throughout the learning days. This provided opportunities for individual voice and shared understanding and opportunities for new leaders to develop a network of support across the system. And as the days progressed, feedback and enthusiasm grew alongside our candor and trust as a team.

We saw evidence of progress when more laughter was present on an ongoing basis, and when folks were enthusiastic for the next session in a month's time.

### Shared leadership: modeling collaborative capacity

The learning days were designed collaboratively, with team members contributing to the overall structure and facilitation. This meant that no single individual held all the knowledge or skills necessary and allowed for learning to be replicated in individual school settings.

The team-based approach to developing our Guide was foundational to the work's eventual success. This structure modelled in real time that no one team member held all the knowledge or skills necessary to build forward in a good way.

We also brought in an outside facilitator familiar with our team three times over the year. This allowed for every member of the team to fully participate throughout the year as their facilitation responsibilities were not present on these days.

### Voice and choice: cultivating shared ownership

Throughout the process, team members were invited to contribute their thoughts at their discretion, building safety and collaboration as the roadmap to our Guide was built together.

We invited team members to contribute their thoughts voluntarily, allowing them to choose when and how they wished to contribute. This built safety and enhanced collaboration as individuals voiced their thoughts and helped distill the essential elements of our conversations and activities. It also helped shape the future learning days and the activities we engaged in. Feedback was gathered regularly and acted upon in the planning for future learning.

### The Guide to Success: elegant simplicity, robust complexity

After 10 months of discussion, relationship-building, and further refinement, we arrived at a common set of criteria to embed in our work, the essential commitments of our *Guide to Success for a Flourishing Leadership*:

1. Healthy Relationships,
2. Effective Collaboration,
3. Effective Communication,
4. Authentic Curiosity, and
5. Systemness.

These five elements, elegant in their simplicity yet robust in their complexity, serve as a roadmap to our flourishing

organization – a guide to success grounded in the ever-elusive concept of grace.

We have also committed to reviewing our Guide annually. It is a living document and that we can refer to in holding one another gently accountable to our shared essential commitments.

This work shifted the culture of our leadership team positively. Through a commitment to a shared purpose, we built trust, team, and positive professional relationships.

By sharing this journey, we hope to inspire other system leaders to cultivate a

flourishing leadership culture within their own organizations, fostering the conditions for authentic growth and success. For when education is placed at the centre of a flourishing community, the possibilities for transformation are boundless. ○

*Christopher Fuzessy has worked in nearly every role in education over the course of his career, moving to Alberta from Montreal three years ago to join the Foothills School Division team as Superintendent of Schools. He holds a B.Ed., M.A., and Ph.D. in Education.*



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# Students

# THRIVE

# Outside!

By Chris Gilmour, Shashi Shergill & Saara Ehalt, Connect Charter School

**D**uring the 2023/2024 school year, Connect Charter School welcomed over 1,300 students to Camp Connect to participate in activities and programming designed to support three areas of their mental health and wellness.

Like most schools across our country, as we emerged from the global pandemic, the mental health needs from our community grew. Our THRIVE program arose from a need within our system: to improve the mental well-being of our students. As a school with a focus on outdoor learning opportunities, we designed our THRIVE program around existing strengths within our staff and students who embrace the opportunity to learn outside the classroom.

Partially inspired by a publication from Outward Bound Canada titled “Help Me Out: How Outdoor Education Impacts and Empowers Youth to Thrive,”<sup>1</sup> we realized that the challenge of supporting the well-being of our students needed to be framed as an opportunity for change.

Schools play a vital role in providing mental health support and services, as they reach many children and offer timely, accessible, and efficient assistance. Supported by a grant from Alberta Education through the Mental Health in Schools Pilot Project, Connect Charter School developed a unique mental wellness initiative called THRIVE aimed at enhancing the mental well-being of our students through outdoor education experiences.

The THRIVE program leveraged staff strengths and interests to improve the

*Students participating in the THRIVE snowshoeing activity.*



teaching and learning of mental health and well-being in schools. School-wide programming addressed the diverse needs of all learners in an inclusive environment, incorporating outdoor, place-based, and nature-oriented activities focused on three key areas: self-awareness, self-management, and resiliency. During the 2023/2024 school year, we provided universal supports to students across two school jurisdictions and more targeted support to a smaller group of students. Our initiative cultivated a deeper appreciation and capacity among teachers and staff members for integrating outdoor education into mental wellness practices, thereby fostering a healthier workplace, learning environment, and culture of wellness.

THRIVE programming has been a year-long journey of self-discovery and acquiring essential knowledge and skills related to mental health. Each student participated in three different THRIVE days, two of which were held at Camp Connect, with the final day taking place in an urban setting in Calgary.

### Leading learning

Our project intentionally used a holistic approach known as *being-knowing-doing* to assist educational leaders design and implement a continuum of supports and services as outlined by Alberta Education.<sup>2</sup> The pedagogy around *knowing* involved creating possibilities through a unique research-informed innovative project that disrupted traditional approaches, and as a result, required courageous leadership. *Doing* came to life through the process of using collaborative inquiry as a signature pedagogy to develop and design a program that centered students and teachers and employed an iterative process of exploring, developing, taking action, and evaluation.

This project brought together two school jurisdictions, Connect Charter School and Calgary Arts Academy, as well as The HOWL Experience, an organization providing transformational community experiences for youth. This partnership was able to provide a diverse program that included outdoor and physical education, arts based learning, and Indigenous ways of being alongside developing skills and strategies around mental wellness. It reinforced the belief that we are stronger together.



The THRIVE challenge course activity. Photos courtesy of Chris Gilmour.

### Outdoor education

Students embarked on THRIVE days with an outdoor education mindset and left with a stronger understanding of self awareness, self-management, and resiliency. Purpose-built activities created the conditions and space for students to enter discussions and experiences that supported mental wellness, focused on relationships and team building, and promoted healthy living. Activities included a variety of low ropes and challenge courses, hikes, and snowshoeing. A big take-away from our experience was that all schools and school boards, can adjust the approach we took to provide students with universal supports for mental health that embrace the outdoors.

### Innovation

From the beginning of our planning, we knew our path forward supporting the mental health of students would look and feel different than mainstream programs and supports. Judging by the responses we received from students, it did!

“I think that being outside in nature and getting fresh air and understanding nature can help me with stress and being overwhelmed. Sometimes when I am inside, I feel squished and everything is loud, but when I am outdoors I can get fresh air and I feel like I have more space.” – Grade 4 student.

“My THRIVE experience was amazing! I learned how to control my emotions. I also learned that art and going outside is another way to help with stress

and strong feelings. I found that being in the forest calmed me down and helped me calm my thoughts.” – Grade 5 student

We are hopeful the THRIVE day program will continue to grow, attract, and impact more and more students. The program is scalable, replicable and leads to success. The biggest take away we want to share with others about our experience is, take your kids outside! ○

*Chris Gilmour is the Superintendent of Connect Charter School in Calgary Alberta, where he has held that position for the last six years. Shashi Shergill has been with Connect Charter School since 2006, and currently serves as Assistant Principal. Saara Ehalt has worked at Connect Charter School for the past two years as a Physical Education teacher and as the Wellness Coordinator.*

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1. Singh, Natasha. “Help Me Out: How Outdoor Education Impacts and Empowers Youth to Thrive.” Outward Bound Canada. <https://files.outwardbound.ca/wp-content/uploads/2022/06/Help-Me-Out.pdf>.
2. Alberta Government. “Implementing a continuum of supports and services: a resource guide for school and school authority leaders.” <https://open.alberta.ca/publications/implementing-continuum-supports-services-resource-guide-school>.

# A Multiyear Process: Student and Staff Wellness

By Teresa Di Ninno & Jeney Gordon, CAPE Public Charter School

**D**iversity has been a constant element of educational environments. Yet, since 2020, diversity has come to mean much more.

School personnel instinctually knew that as students returned to school sites in the fall of 2020, they would be facing a multiplicity of needs that were much more complex and deep than they had experienced in the past.

While our community was addressing the pandemic as best it could, students were trying to navigate their way through amplified existing issues: mental health and anxieties, family strain and financial stress, learning challenges and unending shifts in learning environments, relationships, and pressures. For many students, strong connections with an adult, who was both physically and emotionally present, were lacking. Students turned to peers for support. Not surprisingly, children supporting children during this global crisis yielded few positive outcomes. A strong, multi-faceted, sustained focus on mental health needed to occur.



*Students participating in a team and trust building activity. Photos courtesy of Teresa Di Ninno.*



*Students participating in a team building activity.*



For the 2020/2021 and 2021/2022 academic years, Alberta Education, much like the ministries of other provinces, offered increased funding for mental health supports. In 2022, Alberta saw the implementation of its new Physical Education and Wellness curriculum for Kindergarten to Grade 6. The outcomes within character development, safety and healthy relationships offered schools more opportunities to develop students' social emotional skills and to practice these daily. CAPE increased the mental health contracted time. Reducing screen time and increasing small group work were our attempts at strengthening the social skills drastically affected during the pandemic. These efforts were not enough to shift the tides of poor self image, negative self-talk, toxic complaining, lack of interpersonal skills, anxiety, etc.

During the 2022/2023 school year, CAPE chose to redesign its student wellness program by shifting from an administrative model to a classroom-based model. It became clear that the redesigned supports needed to include adult as well as student components. Dedicated time within the daily schedule offered opportunities for learning about and practice of social skills. During this time, lessons tangibly promoted relationship building between adults, adults and students, and students themselves. Classroom learning purposely targeted the diverse needs of each student in each homeroom from grades two to nine. Flexibility was of crucial importance. School staff, not just teachers, were provided with professional development opportunities in support of individual personal and professional development. Administrative structures changed so that the strategies could filter into classrooms.

CAPE increased its administrative team to include a 0.5 full time equivalent (FTE) vice-principal charged with student and staff wellness. This individual needed to model calm supportive relationships, be empathetic and responsive, accessible, and a good listener. The safety net needed to be as wide as possible, with potential for growth.

Staff and student wellness was part of everyone's job, and we now have dedicated time to accommodate learning. In preparation for working with staff and students, each of the three site-based administrators focused on an area of relationship building and led a book study. One group addressed building relationships before asking for compliance. A second group delved into emotional intelligence.

The third studied how high-yield, predictable teaching provides stability and opportunities for connection. The book study sessions were scheduled once every six to eight weeks with the expectation that teacher professional growth plans tied theory to classroom practice. Group members, including support staff, were encouraged to bring samples of student work, anecdotal information, and situations to review for feedback and discussion.

Site administration and two lead teachers also engaged in professional development with Judy Riege, a vital and impactful training that assisted them in supporting colleagues and students. One key question emerged: "What does 'better' look like?" Administrators prioritized visibility by being outside to greet families when they arrived and to wish them a good evening as they left. Right place, right time has effectively engaged parents who are more reluctant to come into the school, has supported students who struggled to get out of the car, and encouraged the sharing of information about student thoughts and experiences outside of school.

Student-teacher time in the classroom was increased and enhanced, yet we also added a 0.5 FTE student wellness coach to engage in individual and small group work in support of students who need more one-on-one time. Recognizing that several students arrive at school with baggage, making good connections at the start the day allowed our staff to shift the trajectory in a more positive direction. Focusing on social-emotional strategies at the beginning of the day enabled classroom teachers to set the tone for the day and provide a time and place to problem-solve before the business of the day started.

Before students returned to school in September 2024, the complexity of student needs within each homeroom class was

analyzed and a vetted resource was provided. This strategy ensured that each resource was the best suited to support each group and would also support the teacher in providing daily awareness and skills practice. In addition, each teacher and student resource were sectioned and numbered to ensure flexible pacing and ample time for role-playing and discussion. Classroom meetings supported advocacy and problem-solving and allowed students to collectively identify strategies that promote wellness. The classes were intentionally not graded and there are no assignments. Reflective journaling, role playing, overt discussion, art therapy, and cross-grade collaborations were common. Originally, each homeroom teacher worked with their own class. However, complexities around anxiety and gender issues became apparent. In response, the student wellness vice-principal worked with specific groups, with support from our mental health worker.

The current year saw a shift in the focus and in the conversations. What does school community and student wellness look like? It is collegial teams that make time to communicate and plan. It is adults being visible, present, and available. It is administration supporting growth and relationship-building. It is every individual feeling safe and empowered. It is open conversation and dialogue. It is everyone being engaged. ○

*Teresa Di Ninno, CEGEP, B.A., B.Ed., M.A., is an alumnus of McGill University and the University of Toronto. She is the Founder, Past Principal, and current Superintendent of CAPE Public Charter School in Medicine Hat, Alberta.*

*Jeney Gordon, B.F.A., B.Ed., Diploma of Vis. Com., is an alumnus of the University of Lethbridge. Jeney has been the Principal of CAPE Public Charter School for the 18 years.*



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# Multiliteracy in Schools:

## Changing Demographics and Literacy Levels of Contemporary Vocational Education Students in Québec



By Nolan Bazinet, Université de Sherbrooke

**A**s a vocational education teacher trainer in Québec, I regularly hear from in-service teachers about the growing disparity in literacy levels of vocational education students. Though these literacy challenges are often acute within certain demographics (e.g. ethnicity and/or age), they are not exclusively so. For instance, though international students tend to have a wider linguistic literacy gap than local students, an increasing number of local students also struggle with linguistic literacy, which is to say nothing of other literacies that are underdeveloped in both local and foreign students: i.e., digital, information, and critical literacy. Given that these students require extensive multiliteracy development, vocational education teachers are tasked with the role as implicit multiliteracy teachers, in addition to the content presented in their programs.

Traditionally, the term 'literacy' refers to the ability to read and write, but as scholars over the past couple decades have argued,<sup>1,2</sup> joining the globalized workforce requires one to be competent in several literacies (linguistic, digital, informational, critical, etc.). This (re)conception of literacies has been termed *multiliteracies*. According to a

number of vocational education teachers, it's becoming increasingly difficult to integrate the panoply of literacies students need into their programs.

Linguistic literacy development has always been a challenge, but with international student enrolment at all-time highs, linguistic literacy gaps are even more prevalent. Recently, school boards in Québec have been accepting increasingly large cohorts of international students. Although many of the students' linguistic proficiency levels are tested before being accepted into international student programs, these tests are conducted by third party organizations, and thus evaluation standards and protocols are often lacking. As a result, many unqualified students are deemed qualified. This, however, is not unique to international or immigrant students. Many local students who enter the program also have trouble attaining linguistic competency, which puts the vocational education teacher in the role of an implicit English language instructor, assisting students so that they can improve their linguistic skills.

Beyond linguistic literacy, many teachers mention a lack of digital and information literacy in both local and international students. For instance, one teacher discussed how students have difficulty with often rudimentary computer skills,

such as attaching a document to an email or completing basic tasks in Microsoft Word. Other students are said to struggle with basic problem-solving skills on complex problems and how to use appropriate digital resources to solve these problems. This lack of digital, informational, and critical literacy has become a growing issue for contemporary teachers in, and outside, vocational education.

When considering solutions on how to address these multiliterate challenges, one pedagogical counsellor provided an interesting insight. At his vocational education centre, he asks that students take a diagnostic screener to situate their competence with certain literacies. These screeners aid teachers identify their students multiliterate levels and therefore can allow them to appropriately prepare their course for challenges ahead. However, to help students develop their literacies, teachers need time and resources.

There are several tools, strategies, and approaches that teachers can employ to assist their students in developing multiliteracies. One approach would be to develop individual modules in which students can complete on their own time, which does not interfere with course teaching. An excellent example of this is the Medical Academic Communication Program at Saint George's University. There, administrators developed

a linguistic and cultural communication skills development program which allows students to complete individualized modules so they may develop “communication skills, cultural competencies, critical thinking, medical terminology, and reading strategies.”<sup>3</sup> Students complete one hour per week in two six-week modules which are tailored for students’ specific literacy challenges. Nonetheless, such a program requires time and funding to develop and implement, as well as to maintain, but if the demand for vocational students to quickly enter the workforce is crucial, as certain government officials and labour unions proclaim, policymakers might consider investing in comparable initiatives.

Another option is for teachers to establish communities of practice (CoPs) to explore strategies and methods to effectively develop literacies in their students. CoPs are centered on the idea that a number of stakeholders who share a common interest and a desire to learn about a particular issue develop a community in which they can share their experiences and provide solutions or proposals to improve those situations.<sup>4</sup> One of the significant advantages of CoPs is so that teachers who have experience dealing

with the same issue can partake in various ways of improving the situation, assisting each other with specific, pertinent solutions to their particular context.

Current vocational education teachers already experience mounting pressure to graduate students quickly to get them into the workforce. Just this past year, the Québec government has requested that certain industrial and professional sectors like health and construction accelerate their vocational programs, cutting content hours to quickly graduate students; yet more and more students begin the program with little prior knowledge and underdeveloped multiliteracies. This puts

pressure on vocational teachers to qualify students that are not ready or have barely met the required competencies deemed necessary for their program. If the government wants to adequately address the labour shortage, properly funding vocational education centres so that teachers are better equipped to assist with students’ multiliterate gap is incredibly important. ○

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# Engaging School Leaders and Designing Interventions Through Action Research



Principal Tracy Tomlinson, SAT Lori McCaw, and the primary staff of St. Gregory Catholic School, Picton, Ontario, working and learning together. Photos courtesy of ALCDSB.

By Karen Shannon, David DeSantis, Darcey French & Michele McGrath, Algonquin & Lakeshore Catholic District

**T**he Reaching Every Reader initiative began in the Algonquin and Lakeshore Catholic District School Board (ALCDSB) in 2019, committing the district to a multi-year investment in professional learning on science-based structured literacy pedagogy. Summer conference sessions were sponsored by the district in 2020 facilitated by experts including Dr. David Kilpatrick. Central office staff of the Curriculum and Special Education Departments worked to facilitate ongoing learning within primary classrooms including resource development for asynchronous professional learning. Uptake and enthusiasm for the science-based literacy pedagogy grew quickly in the first 18 months of the initiative but was thwarted

with the onset of the pandemic, the move to online learning, and the factors that accompanied the return to in-person learning.

Surveys of early childhood educators in 2022 and 2023 as well as principal observation reported variability in the implementation of structured literacy pedagogy and significant numbers of new teachers assigned to primary classrooms who had not participated in any professional development sponsored by the Reaching Every Reader initiative. Administrative tasks, labour shortages, and compliance with additional health protocols added strain to the ability of school principals to focus on instructional leadership.

In the fall of 2022, superintendents devised a plan to dedicate provincial funding earmarked for gap-closing interventions to go deeper with professional learning in structured literacy pedagogy where school

and system data indicated student needs were the greatest. With the goal of shifting the momentum to advance the Reaching Every Reader strategy from a centrally driven to a school-owned initiative, the senior team of ALCDSB decided to engage an external researcher to assist in answering the question, “how do we best leverage the principal as instructional leader?” The intervention design would focus on using data to address equity for students most in need of support, monitor learning, and inform system-decision making.

A five-phase action research cycle (envision, plan, take action, analyze, and reflect) was proposed where school leaders envisioned their desired student achievement outcomes of the gap-closing intervention and progress through a research cycle to document their work with their school team, collect and monitor data, and reflect on next steps. Ten schools were selected to participate in the project and were supported by a System Principal Mentor (SPM) and a Literacy Special Assignment Teacher

(SAT). In addition to meeting regularly with their school teams and observing in classrooms, principals met virtually with the researcher and SPM over the five-month project regularly.

School teams were provided with funding to meet for a day each month and in some cases to spend time modeling strategies and supporting each other in classrooms. All school teams monitored and documented student response to interventions and reflections on their learning. Principals documented their experience working with the SPM, the SAT, and their reflections on conditions that helped and hindered their work as instructional leaders in their schools. Thematic analysis was applied to the reflections shared by principals throughout the project, in group meetings, and one-on-one interviews. The following findings were developed, reviewed, and validated by all principal participants.

### One: Principals engage as instructional leaders with trusted peer support

- Principals engaged in professional learning with other Principals and readily shared effective strategies: *“we recognized an essential need to learn and grow from others. We so often work in isolation.”*
- Principals valued the experience and expertise of the SPM: *“I needed help getting to free myself up to co-learn with the teachers. She’s a good instructional leader – I look up to her.”*
- Principals advocated for a continuous entry model of professional learning so that willingness to learn and ask questions is encouraged without judgement: *“Our learning as school leaders is at the surface level and is so broad in scope that I feel simply overwhelmed with the volume and constant shift of focus.”*
- Principals indicated that an important factor in enabling learning and risk taking is trust in their relationship with other principals, central staff, and superintendents. *“We had a strong relationship history so it was really helpful – the trust was there [...] trust and respect are so important... can I share my questions safely?”*

### Two: Central leadership provides flex, focus, and accountability

- Principals indicated that regularly scheduled discussions with the SPM was an



SAT Lori McCaw discussing intervention strategies with teachers and Vice Principal Casey Wells at St. James Major Catholic School, Sharbot Lake, Alberta.

effective strategy to encourage their accountability: *“this project was really good. The SPM and SAT’s involvement allowed us to zone in, structure it, added accountability – it was really successful.”*

- Creating flexibility for schools and meeting ministry reporting requirements in initiatives is challenging but important: *“within this project, we could create our own scope of what to do.”*
- Cross-departmental teamwork is necessary to support consistent approaches to intervention planning at the central level and at the school level: *“in class visits I saw much whole group, great work but not as much tier 2 as we need...the Special Education Teacher was instrumental in getting to some of these tier 2 needs.”*
- Highly competent and experienced Principal leaders and Teacher leaders are needed to facilitate professional learning: *“the SPM and SAT pushed the agenda. It was well organized, helpful! We probably wouldn’t have made the progress we did without it.”*

### Three: Professional learning flourishes delivered in schools and with teams

- Principals and teachers valued having professional learning facilitated in the school including modeling in the classroom: *“it’s easier to move along faster when working on professional development (PD) in your own school. Don’t pull us in for same spot PD.”*
- The inquiry cycle, “analyze, plan, act, reflect, analyze...” with timelines and documented observations shared with all team members was highly effective: *“the ‘how’ piece and the ‘reflect’ piece are*

*critical. Without this being scheduled we wouldn’t have had time for this.”*

- Paid release time for teachers and early childhood educators to participate in team meetings was critical: *“having dedicated time together created a team response to whole education of a child,” “release time was critical.”*
- Networks for both teacher teams and principals would be beneficial so that there are people you can turn to if you want to see how an intervention works: *“it would be really helpful, to see exemplary practice elsewhere.”*

The Action Research findings have influenced the current design of literacy gap-closing intervention work in ALCDSB which is flourishing with a second SPM and two more Literacy SATs now supporting the learning of school teams across the district. ○

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# School Mental Health: Should We Be Fixing Students or Creating Healthier Systems?



By David Tranter, Ph.D., Lakehead University & Ashley McLellan

**Y**ou are a school leader concerned about the mental health of your students. You are approached by a team of psychologists who have developed a program called WISE Teens.<sup>1</sup> It's an eight-week social/emotional learning (SEL) course based on Dialectical Behaviour Therapy, widely considered evidence-based and effective. Four main topics will be covered with

your students: mindfulness, emotion regulation, distress tolerance, and interpersonal effectiveness. Students will receive in-class instruction, real-world homework, and personal coaching. What leader wouldn't jump at the chance to offer this to their students?

And yet, when researchers compared over 1000 13- and 14-year-old students who received this training as part of their health class versus peers who received no SEL instruction, the WISE Teens got worse. Almost immediately, the students in the SEL course had poorer relationships with

their parents and increases in anxiety and depression. They were less emotionally regulated and had less awareness of their emotions. They reported a lower quality of life and were still reporting poorer relationships with their parents six months after the program had ended.

Was WISE Teens just a bad SEL program? What about others? The My Resilience in Adolescence (MYRIAD) program was tested with 4000+ students.<sup>2</sup> Over ten weeks, they received regular in-school instruction in both self-regulation and



# **Ironically, it's mental health professionals themselves who are beginning to call for less mental health education, expressing concern that our efforts may be having the opposite effect.**

mindfulness skills. At the end of the course, the MYRIAD teens showed worse scores on depression and well-being, as compared to teens who received no SEL instruction. The teens who had been identified at the outset as already at risk for mental health difficulties responded the poorest to SEL instruction.

Large-scale reviews of universal school-based SEL programs have found little evidence that SEL instruction reliably works.<sup>3,4</sup> Furthermore, there is emerging concern that such programs may contribute to “prevalence inflation”, the pathologizing of otherwise typical child and teen feelings and behaviour.<sup>5</sup> Mental health problems become self-fulfilling prophecies for some students who learn about anxiety and depression and then interpret their normal responses as those of an anxious or depressed person.

Ironically, it's mental health professionals themselves who are beginning

to call for less mental health education, expressing concern that our efforts may be having the opposite effect. Recall the widespread popularity of the Drug Abuse Resistance Education (DARE) program until it was revealed that some students were actually more likely to use drugs after attending it.<sup>6</sup>

Student stress, along with educator stress, is at an all-time high. Yet, our efforts to improve student mental health through universal SEL instruction don't seem to be working. But is mental health a subject like any other that can simply be taught? Mental health is complex, it's subjective, and is arguably less about individual skills and more about relationships and experiences. As Victor Frankl said, “Happiness cannot be pursued; it must ensue.” Perhaps it's time to shift our focus from student instruction to creating healthier educational environments

*Continued on page 18*



*Third Path Consulting graphic. Courtesy of Ashley McLellan.*

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*Continued from page 17*

for all. However, adopting a truly systemic approach to mental health requires a significant shift in our thinking and change in strategy.

Systems thinking starts by recognizing that we too often focus our efforts on changing the parts of the system that we can readily see, but ultimately make the least difference.<sup>7</sup> We spend our energies on the *what* of systems: things like programs, curriculum, or even the people. When our efforts aren't successful, we change the *what* over and over again, adding new programs, altering the curriculum, or seeking out new and more experts.

However, if a system is not fully healthy, changing the *what* is rarely as influential as changing *how* we do things. The *how*—as in, how we teach, how we talk with and listen to students, and how we support one another—isn't as readily apparent as the *what*, but it's much more powerful in defining healthy systems. For example, can we conclude from the above studies that the *what* (e.g., mindfulness) is bad for students or was it *how* mindfulness was taught?

Similarly, focusing on the underlying *why* of our efforts challenges us to be clearer about the genuine purposes of our actions. Often our purposes are unclear, hidden even to ourselves, and at odds with one another. Why were the above studies undertaken? Was it to genuinely improve student mental health, or to develop a brief, manualized SEL product that can be sold to schools around the world? If we are clear and transparent about our *why* in advance – such as “our purpose is to strengthen belonging among our students” – then we (and others) can ensure consistent accountability to our explicit goal.

Finally, along with a greater focus on the how and why of our work, system thinking means recognizing the complexity of education and the interconnectedness of all its parts, seen and unseen. Being systemic means knowing that our most well-meaning efforts will all too often have unintended consequences. And that even the most compelling evidence-based program may work in one context but fail in another. Therefore, we need to allow educators

freer rein to experiment with their own solutions, make more mistakes, recognize what is working and what is not, and modify their efforts accordingly. But most of all it means shifting our focus away from “fixing” kids through SEL instruction, to creating systems that are fundamentally healthier for all students and educators alike. ○

*David Tranter's book, The Third Path: A Relationship-Based Approach to Student Well-Being and Achievement has been adopted widely by educators across Canada. He is the 2023 recipient of the Ontario Principals' Council Outstanding Contribution to Education Award joining past recipients such as the Honourable Murray Sinclair and Dr. Chris Hadfield. For more information about his work, go to [www.thirdpath.ca](http://www.thirdpath.ca).*

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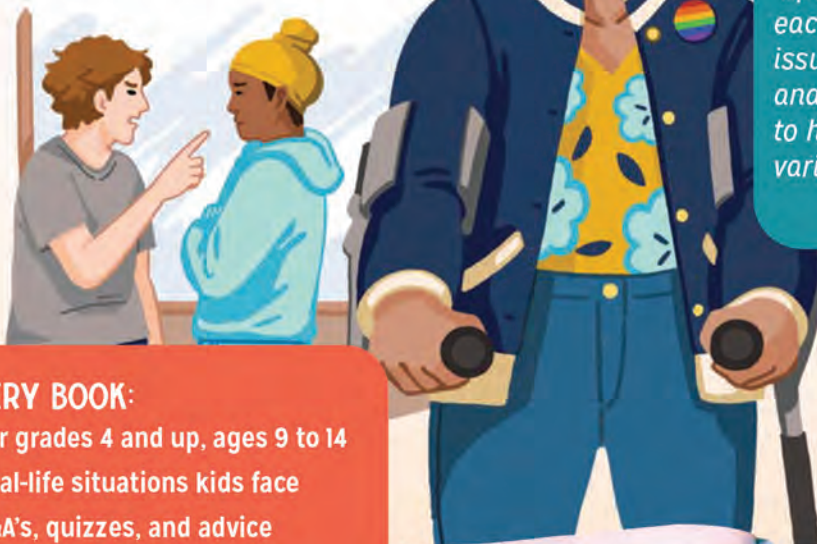
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